

Shining in Crimson

Empire of Blood Book One

Robert S. Wilson

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For Mom. If only you were here to see it...

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As for anyone I've forgotten to mention here, please forgive me. These days, I'm lucky to even remember my own name.

CHAPTER 1

THE PENITENT

Hank hadn't expected the judge to decide any other way. These days they didn't hand out robes to anyone afraid of sending less than a dozen men to Necropolis almost every day. Hank found that he couldn't blame them. It keeps the peace, he thought. Even in the days before the chaos took hold, America had never been as safe as it was now.

He sat in the back of a paddywagon surrounded by twenty or so other males of all different shapes, colors, and sizes, also condemned to die. The air smelled of bad breath, thick body odor, and stale, smoked tobacco. Only a few of them had committed violent crimes. A tall, pale, black-haired man with tattoos covering his arms had murdered three people. More than a handful of the prisoners were children. One, a young blond kid, had been caught stealing in a supermarket. Most of the men had broken the morality laws, same as Hank.

Hank wasn't proud of what he'd done, though he wasn't sure the punishment fit the crime. He could see the last of the sun being swallowed by the horizon out the back window. They had traveled through the middle of nowhere for what seemed like days now. He saw more pale sand and tumbleweeds out that back window than he ever had before. He was pressed between two other men like a sardine. And his backside felt like it had been beaten by the hours of country roads.

A while later, the sun disappeared, taking the last rays of sunlight Hank figured he would ever see. He thought of Toby and swallowed hard. None of the other men noticed. They were all too busy with their own problems. After hours of nothing but darkness outside, street lights began poking out of the void and then drifted away just as fast. At first, it was only every once in a while. Then several at a time. Before long, there were too many to count. Finally, they streamed together into a long line of light that changed colors as it burned into Hank's retinas. After that, large neon signs started appearing. If the colors weren't so bright, Hank wouldn't have been able to see them through the phantom line of light still obscuring his vision.

Now there were new, more colorful shapes. He closed his eyes to make the nuisance go away, but it only grew worse. The only sounds were breathing and the engine. He opened his eyes again and looked outside. The street lights revealed sidewalks and parking lots beyond the road, all of which were empty. He wondered why they bothered turning on the lights. It wasn't like the residents of Necropolis needed them. For the first time since he knew of the city's existence, the meaning of its name dawned on him. Necropolis, city of the dead.

He snickered. Some of the men turned and looked at him darkly. This only made him smile more. He was about to let out a burst of laughter when the wagon came to a screeching halt. All the humor left him at once. Other than the low idle of the engine, everything became dead quiet. Strange mechanical noises crept from the back of the wagon like the sound of gears waking within a clock tower. Then he heard similar noises from the front of the wagon. Twin thuds came from the front and back of the wagon, shaking it and making most of the passengers jump. Both of the mechanical doors began to open with a horrible screeching.

The open doorway in the back led to the quiet, empty city. But the front doorway contained shapes of men dressed in black, armored outfits. They had the American Imperial flag printed on their right breasts and wore gas masks on their faces. Each of them held a thick, black hose pointed at a different group of prisoners. Large clouds of gas shot out from the hoses, filling the wagon with a thick, noxious fog. It tasted strongly of sulfur. Choking on the gas, Hank nearly vomited. The convicts began flooding out the back of the

wagon and away from the suffocating gas. Hank followed, still choking as he ran.

When he reached the road, he leaned over and joined the chorus of gasps. His lungs burned as he inhaled. But he kept taking deep breaths anyway, hoping it would eventually help. He looked over just in time to see the last man, a short Hispanic with long hair, come stumbling from the wagon. The back door shut with a loud thud. Then the wagon squealed its tires and sped off. By the time Hank could breathe without hurting too badly, it was gone.

The one who murdered three people lead several of the others down an alley off the main road. The area was surrounded with old rundown factories. A busted-up, red car from before the war was parked in front of one of the buildings. Several men managed to break in and were trying to hot-wire it. All around, men ran in different directions, either alone or in groups. Hank circled around, trying to decide where to go. But in his heart, he knew it didn't matter where he went. None of them would make it out alive. No one ever did. For the last twenty years, the American Empire boasted the most effective justice system in the world. It was simple, really. Use one evil to destroy another. Sure, some innocents got caught up in the mix from time to time. But as the saying went, you have to break a few eggs.

He decided to go on his own. He was pretty sure the locals could sense heat, making a group an easier target. And with going solo, there would be no one to slow him down. He found an alley a few blocks down from the other men and followed it in the opposite direction. It got darker the further he went. The rough texture of brick grazed his hands as he felt his way through the alley. When he'd gone a ways down the block, a loud engine cranking and failing almost gave him a heart attack. What good would a car do for those morons anyway?

Of course the thought of Toby reared its ugly head again. Toby would already have that thing going zero to sixty. That boy of his could fix anything you put in front of him, so long as it had moving parts. But he was only sixteen, and now that his father was about to check out, who would take care of him? The boy's mother left when he was a baby. Hank never managed to find her and felt sure she didn't want to be found. And Diana, he didn't want to think about Diana. The thought of Toby growing up in the Empire all

alone hurt him enough. It dawned on Hank if he could make it through the night and get close enough to the edge of the city, he might make it out alive. The bastards were bound to Necropolis. It was common knowledge, ruthless as they were, that they held to their end of the blood pact rather loyally.

Hank turned left down another alley, this one even more narrow than the one before. Something ahead smelled rotten. He heard the scurrying sounds of rats all along the way. Before the war, the residents of Necropolis would have kept the city clean of them. But then again, before the war, Necropolis hadn't been Necropolis. No one even knew its inhabitants were real then. The war had brought them out. They waited centuries for such a war to come along and leave the humans vulnerable. They were smarter than humans. Anyone who didn't blindly believe everything the Imperial Church brainwashed them to could see that.

The first scream echoed from somewhere far behind him as he came upon North Eastern Avenue. It stopped him dead in his tracks and he turned to make sure no one was coming. Once he was sure they weren't close enough to get him, he crossed the street. He started to look both ways as he went, out of habit, his heart running in overdrive. He hadn't truly been afraid until that point. Hearing the scream made it real.

From the look of things, North Eastern Avenue had once been very busy. Hank spotted an old army surplus store a ways down the street and started towards it. Everything looked gray. The road, the sidewalk, and even the street signs. As he crossed a side road just before the surplus store, he heard more screams. The screams were coming from way up in the air. He looked up above the tops of the buildings behind him. Figures dressed in what looked like black rags flew around in circles above the buildings. Each one of them had a man wearing a blue prisoner's jumpsuit hanging from its face. He couldn't tell for sure from that distance, but it looked like they held the men with their teeth. Hank watched in horror as, one after another, the flying figures began to drop their victims to the ground. None of them made a sound as they fell, giving Hank the impression they were already dead. He turned and ran for the army surplus store.

He went for the back of the building, for cover if nothing else. He came upon a door with a window. He found a couple of big rocks on the ground. Afraid busting any glass would alert them to where he was, he set the rocks

down and began to slowly rip a portion of his shirt off as quietly as he could. As he was ripping the shirt, the screams started again. He wrapped the strip of shirt around a rock. He waited for another round of screams. When they started, he cringed as he slammed the shirt-wrapped rock into the door's window.

The rock shattered the window inward, knocking glass onto the tiled floor inside. It was quiet enough, Hank thought, to be covered by the screaming. He carefully put his arm in the hole where the window had been and felt around for the lock. The air inside was cool. Once he managed to unlock the door, Hank looked around to make sure he saw no movement. He went inside once he was sure he was alone.

Aside from the little bit of light coming in the front windows, the inside of the store was fairly dark. He could make out the different aisles, but not what sat on most of the shelves. He thought of turning on the light switch, but decided not to risk it. He groped around the shelves carefully. For the most part, he found what felt like clothing. Eventually, he came across a large machete that included a sheath with a belt clip. He backtracked to where he'd found the belts and took one that seemed like it would fit him well. He put the belt around his waist with the sheath attached and buckled it tightly. He put the machete in its sheath and sighed. He thought having the thing should give him more comfort than it did.

When he made his way to the next aisle, more screams caught his attention. He tried to block them out, but had to admit to himself the sound was making him more and more nervous. After all, they must have gotten most of the prisoners by now. He continued feeling his way through the items on the shelves, trying to find anything useful and especially hoping to come across a flashlight. Particularly the kind that came with its own batteries. He'd come all the way down the aisle before he noticed a good while had passed since he last heard any screaming. This worried him.

He picked up his pace as he headed for the next aisle. About halfway down, he found something in a thin cardboard box he couldn't identify. He looked toward the end of the aisle where the light shone in through the front windows and reflected on the white, tiled floor. He snuck over to the end of the aisle and knelt down. He put the package just close enough to the light to see it was a thin box of matches. He considered using the matches to light his

way to look for a flashlight. But, remembering they could sense heat and not knowing their range, he was reluctant to do so. He stared at the matches for a few seconds. Then he looked back at the dark aisle he had been searching and sighed.

A voice in his head reminded him that they were fairly small matches and it was highly unlikely the things could sense heat from so far away. Besides, if they could detect heat that well, they would have already found him by now. With that thought, he gave in and tore open the box with his trembling hands. Once he freed one of the match packs, he dropped the rest of the box. Then he pulled out a match and lit it before he could change his mind. The match filled a small perimeter around itself with light and the smell of sulfur. The scent almost soothed him. He knew the small flame wouldn't last long, so he carefully started searching the closest shelves. A moment later he felt a stinging, burning pain in the fingers holding the match. He threw it on the ground and did a quiet dance while sucking his thumb and finger. Continuing his dance of pain, he began smacking his fingers against the side of his leg. When the stinging died down enough, he took a deep breath and sighed again.

He took out another match and lit it, moving on to the next set of shelves. In the dim light he could see flippers, snorkels, and goggles of different sizes. He moved on to the next set of shelves. Something reflective caught his eye. He looked closer. It was a compass. He took hold of it greedily, looked it over and then clipped it to his belt. By the time he finished searching the rest of the aisle, he had used half the book of matches with ten remaining. He lit another, looking at the items at the end of the last aisle. There he found what he'd been looking for. A plastic package gleamed before him containing a green flashlight with two D sized batteries. He smiled and went to reach for it when he heard a thud from above the ceiling. His heart skipped a beat.

Leaving the flashlight behind, he knelt down and slipped behind the aisle. A split second after he managed to hide himself, he heard another thud and then the middle of the ceiling collapsed. Debris came crashing down as a skulking figure dressed in dark ragged clothing dropped like a cat onto the floor several aisles down from him. Hank turned and leaned back against the aisle to hide. He could hear nothing but very obvious and slow footsteps. It

was quiet enough that if his enemy could breathe, Hank would have heard him do so.

The steps sounded like they were going away from him toward the other side of the store. He winced as he attempted to pull out his machete without making any noise. Once he managed to free the machete, he tried to propel himself onto his feet just as quietly. His left leg had fallen asleep and caused his foot to hit the floor with a light tap. Before he could straighten himself fully, he heard the sound of rapid movement above him and without thinking pulled the machete upward with both hands toward the sound. He looked up to see the figure stuck with the machete, its fangs showing as it hissed at him. Its yellow eyes resembled the eyes of a cat or a snake on a face that reminded him of a pasty male model turned crackhead. He pushed the machete harder into the creature, hoping it would die, and felt a warm drop of liquid fall into his open mouth and then to the back of his throat. He choked on it. The figure grabbed hold of the machete, pulling it from Hank's hands, and threw it aside. Hank heard the machete hit the floor as the ragged model with yellow eyes straightened itself and smiled at him.

Then the figure made a horrible, high-pitched squealing sound as it jumped down from the top of the aisle toward Hank. By instinct, Hank put his hands out to stop the thing, realizing it would do no good. When he felt his hands resisting the force of the creature, he opened his eyes to see what should have been the impossible. His hands were actually holding the thing back. It looked at him with shock on its sculpted features.

Experimentally, Hank tried gripping the thing with his hands and found it quite easy to do. He pulled the creature sideways and then flung it upward. It flew through the air and fell backward knocking over several of the aisles in a roar of sheet metal. He wiped his mouth where he felt the warm liquid and looked at his hand. It was a dark, almost black, thick substance. The creature's blood. It had to be. Hank took advantage of the moment to retrieve his machete. It took him a while of reaching around aimlessly on the floor, but he found it. He turned toward where the creature fell and saw it was gone. He looked around desperately, knowing what it would cost him if he made any more mistakes. He pulled the machete blunt end against his arm so he could slash underhand if need be. He no longer had to use both hands to hold it steady with his new-found strength. He wondered how long the affects of the

blood would last as he crept around the still standing aisles looking for the thing.

He could hear a lot he hadn't been able to before. One sound was a faint rustling from behind the aisle to his right. He looked at his hands and then silently put his palms against the wall of the aisle and pushed the whole thing over without effort. He heard the same high-pitched squeal. This time it seemed to echo and bounce around in his brain. He jumped on top of the toppled metal shelving with an agility to match the creature he had just pinned underneath. He glanced down to see it writhing and hissing, only its head free. Watching the pitiful thing, he pondered what it would take to kill it. He knew all of the old lore involved, who didn't? But how much of it was actually true, he couldn't be sure. He put all of his strength into stabbing the machete down into the creature's throat. He hoped it would die, but knew if it didn't it would at least be pinned for the moment. It didn't die. Instead, it hissed louder. Hank jumped down to the floor beside the creature's head. Then he reached down and picked up the metal shelving from the thing and pushed it forward so it fell down on its other side with a loud crash. The noise reminded him his captive had many brethren out there in the city. All eager to suck any man's lifeblood from him.

He waited a moment, making sure he and the creature were alone for the time being. Several minutes passed while Hank tried to think above the racket of its hissing. He reached down and pulled out the machete. Just as soon as he pulled the machete upward, he brought it back down blade first, chopping the creature's head off. The head began squealing again, sputtering out some strange language Hank had never heard. He brought the blade up and back down again on one of its arms. Then the other. Then in one swipe, he severed both legs. The thing was obviously still alive, but it seemed unlikely he could do much to harm it. The head rolled to one side and continued squealing unintelligible words in a shrill, soprano voice. Hank took a deep breath as he used his fingers to wipe the blood from the machete. Then he made a sour face as he licked his bloody hand clean, making sure to quickly swallow the blood. He tried to ignore the worry of infection lingering in the back of his mind.

He left the body and its severed extremities wiggling while he walked back to the end of the last aisle, the only one left standing. He put his

machete in its sheath and took the flashlight from its prong on the shelf. With the flashlight ready, he went up and down the remaining aisle shining it at the shelves. He was looking for some kind of thermos. When he didn't find one, he was forced to pick up the other shelves one by one until he found what he was looking for. He grabbed two of them, a red one and a blue one. He also made sure to grab a backpack. Then he went back to where the creature lay on the floor in pieces. He put the blue thermos in the backpack while bending down to one of the thing's arms. Then he opened the red thermos, set it upright on the floor in front of him, and put its lid between his teeth. He picked up the arm, severed end facing down, and began to squeeze it over the thermos.

The same dark liquid that he had wiped from his mouth poured into the thermos in a thin stream. When the stream became a light trickle, he shook out the last little bit and threw it aside. Then he took the lid from his teeth and screwed it back on the thermos tightly. He looked over at the arm and was surprised to see, unlike all the creature's other parts, it was lying still. He wondered if doing the same to the head would kill it. He was pretty sure it would be a good start, but decided he didn't have the stomach to find out.

Then he put the red thermos in his backpack and got up. He looked around with his flashlight until he saw a sign that said RESTROOMS. He put on the backpack and then followed the sign to the men's room. The decrepit fluorescent tubes on the ceiling flickered a few times and then came to life, shining white light throughout the room. Hank let his hand fall from the light switch and walked over to examine the sink. There was a sort of rusty film collecting around the drain. He tried the cold handle first. Nothing. Then he tried the hot. Still nothing. The realization hit Hank that twenty years without artificial irrigation would dry out a desert town just a little bit. He felt a spell of panic coming on. He had expelled a lot of energy and his body was now ready to be hydrated. And what if there was no water to be found in the whole city? He rushed from the bathroom, turned on the flashlight, and spun around looking for any other doors. He saw one in the far front corner of the building beyond the open space where the metal shelving once stood. It said EMPLOYEES ONLY. He rushed toward it, found the doorknob was unlocked, and opened it.

Inside, three video screens displayed different angles of the sales floor. The various body parts of the thing twitched in one of the black and white screens. Shining the flashlight around, he saw several large shelves with items that never made it to the sales floor. In the middle of the room sat a small table with several ashtrays and magazines on it. A brown jacket sat over the back of a chair at the end of the table. Just beyond the table, Hank's flashlight illuminated something big and white that filled Hank with hope. He ran forward, nearly knocking over the table and pulled the handle of the refrigerator open. The chill of cold, moist air hit him and he smiled as he looked inside. On the top shelf sat four twelve-packs of bottled water. The liquid inside sparkled at Hank. He fumbled one of the bottles from its plastic ring and twisted the cap off. He took a deep breath wondering if bottled water could go bad. Deciding that bad water was better than no water, he tossed his head back and took a long drink, some of the water spilling from his mouth and down his neck and chest. He was sure it was the best water he ever drank in his life.

He looked beside the fridge with the flashlight and saw there were cabinets and a sink. He began opening cabinets looking for food. He found none, but instead found several plastic glasses and bowls. He took one of the bowls out, poured water into it, plunged his hands in, and began to scrub. He got out the blue thermos and unscrewed its lid, setting both on the table. It took three bottles to fill up the thermos. Then he grabbed one of the unopened twelve-packs and put it in the backpack as well.

He put the backpack on and headed out onto the sales floor towards the living puzzle he had made. Then he angled his foot like a hockey stick beside the still-hissing head and began sliding it forward, covering the mouth and muffling its voice. The creature bit hard into Hank's shoe, but its fangs, blocked by the thick leather, came nowhere near his flesh. When he stopped and pulled the head from his shoe, it sat just within the lit-up portion of linoleum in front of where the aisles had been. One thing Hank did know, the vampires of Necropolis only came out at night for a reason. If this one didn't die from dismemberment, the sun would soon come up and finish the job anyway. Either way, with that done, Hank at least felt he could move on.

CHAPTER 2

THE MEDIATOR

Simon Withers was very nervous sitting in the backseat of the Empire-assigned car. After all, it was his first day and not exactly the ideal job for anyone who happened to enjoy living. The inside of the car gave off that new car scent. He wondered if his driver had also driven the former Mediator. The former Mediator managed to stick it out for a whole six months. Simon was sure he would beat that. He always thought of himself as a save-the-day kind of guy. Nervous as he was, he would get over his fear and be the one to do it for the long haul. He looked out the car window at the dark abyss he knew would be sand as far as the eye could see by the light of the sun. Then he looked ahead at the blurry glow of garish neon signs that marked one of the most famous cities of all time. After the Empire cleaned up the mess left from the second civil war, the Emperor made an example of this city. Since it had flourished so deeply in sin before, now it would be the place of death for all who sinned.

Simon smiled, relishing his part in such justice, and the tension lifted from his shoulders. What was there to fear when he stood as a representative of the American Empire of Almighty God? His smile grew, nearly wrapping around his head. A large, bright neon sign filled the top half of the windshield as the car began to slow. The sign said:

"Welcome

To Fabulous"

The next two words, once written in bright red paint, were scribbled over with white, flaking spray paint but still faintly visible. In place of the scribbled-out city name in dark red, one word stood out written in sloppy letters: Necropolis, the name given to the city upon its rebirth by the vampires. Underneath, the final word was still mostly intact and lit up. It said Nevada. Their power taken by the Empire, names and borders were all that remained of the former states. Democracy could go, but you couldn't go taking away people's state pride. Simon was running his hands down the smooth leather of his seat when he felt the car come to a stop. Confused, he looked around outside. He had to lean way back in his seat to see the welcome sign that was now towering above the car.

"Excuse me, driver, why are we stopped? We're not even in the city yet," he inquired.

The driver tipped his hat to Simon in the mirror. "I'm sorry sir. Didn't anybody tell you? The Mediator alone is allowed access to the city... unharmed," the driver explained.

Simon gripped at the seat, his nails digging into the leather, and sighed.

"You mean I'm going to have to *walk* the rest of the way?" he said through his teeth.

"Yes sir, I'm afraid so," the driver said, attempting to hide a smile.

Simon gave the driver a nasty look in return. He opened his door slowly in a gesture of implied superiority. Then he got out, slamming the door and almost knocking himself backward in the process. He brushed at his clothes as if to clean himself of the car's filthiness and headed toward the city.

"Um, sir? Aren't you forgetting something?" the driver's scratchy voice said behind him. He turned to see the driver hanging his head out the window and looking smug. Simon stared at him with a blank expression. His patience for the driver had vanished hours before. The driver sighed and leaned over the passenger seat and opened the glove compartment. He pulled a thick folded white paper from within and sat upright, offering it to Simon through the open window. "Take it, it's the map to where you have to meet them," he said.

Still angry, Simon stepped over to the car. He snatched the folded map from the driver without a word, turned, and started walking again. He staggered as he went, his leather dress shoes unwilling to accommodate him in such rough terrain. When he crossed the city line, he gritted his teeth as he heard the driver snickering behind him. He was beginning to wonder if his new boss, Ted Chambers, director of Vampire Negotiations, knew whom he was dealing with. Simon decided when the night was over, he would make sure he did.

Simon fumbled the map from angle to angle trying to figure out where he was as he race-walked down the street. He was too spooked by the night and the quiet city to stop and give the map proper concentration. His hands trembled as he turned it over to see if maybe the other side would start making some kind of sense. Trying to read the street sign up ahead, he noticed just how much noise he'd been making. Now that he stopped moving, the rustling map echoed in his brain over the dead silence. He stood there a moment just listening. Eventually, the echoes died out and were replaced by what sounded like the steady beat of a bass drum. It scared him as it became faster, forcing him to realize it was actually his own heart beating. He took a deep breath, reminding himself he was the only human truly safe in this place. The thought calmed him, at first because of his safety. Then, it fed his ego, taming his heart even more. When he felt as relaxed as he could get, he took another look at the map. With his mind much clearer and his panic subdued, he quickly found where he was on the map. According to it, getting to the building where the vampire's held their council was just a straight walk from where he stood.

He started walking again, this time not quite as aimlessly, now that he knew where he was and where he was going. Still a little nervous, he reached into the jacket pocket of his Armani suit and pulled out an unopened pack of cigarettes. He opened the pack, took one out, and lit it. Simon threw the plastic from the pack on the sidewalk and dragged deeply on the cigarette as he walked. He looked up at the brightly lit colorful buildings that took up the skyline ahead. He felt his chest loosen as the nicotine caused adrenaline to release through his body.

He was actually starting to relax when in the wink of an eye a tall man with long black hair and red eyes, dressed in a black suit and bowler hat

seemed to appear out of thin air right in front of him. He barely stopped himself from running into the man. When he managed to catch his balance, he immediately backed away. As he scrambled backwards, he fell on his backside and tried to scoot further away. The man looked down at him and smiled, revealing a mouthful of shiny white teeth complete with long sharp canines coming from the top row like the fangs of a dog. It was a human vampire.

"I presume you are Mr. Withers?" the man said in a deep scratchy voice with an accent Simon couldn't quite place. Simon swallowed and cringed. His first time meeting one of these blood suckers and already he was panicking.

"Y-yes. I am sir. And who... who might you be?" he asked.

"My name is Luciano Sandalio. But I am of no importance. I am merely here to guide you safely to the tower," the man said while reaching his hand out to Simon. Simon reluctantly took the cold hand and felt a chill run up his arm and down his back as Luciano helped him effortlessly off the ground. Then he brushed off the back of his clothes, reached down, and picked up his cigarette that had landed on the edge of the sidewalk when he fell. He took another deep drag and threw it back on the ground and stomped it out.

"Now, if you will follow me, this way, sir," Luciano said motioning ahead of himself with both arms.

"If you don't mind me asking, why do I need a guide if it's just right up the street?" Simon asked.

"Well, Mr. Withers, there has been a drop-off tonight from the Kansas City justice department and it seems there are still several convicts unaccounted for. So, I have been sent to make sure that you arrive safely," Luciano said casually, turning his back to lead the way.

"Oh, I see." Simon said. He found himself looking around for felons hiding in the surrounding dark alleys as he followed the vampire.

After a while of walking, the street curved to the right. As they came around the curve, Simon could see down the strip more clearly. Many of the buildings had busted old neon signs hanging all around them. Some of the buildings had large gaping holes where their front walls used to be. It looked

as though several random explosions had gone off up and down the street. Piles of rubble lay just about everywhere Simon looked. The vampire stuck out his pale right hand and slid it on the top of a white smashed-up limousine as they walked past it. His hand would have been camouflaged against the white paint if it weren't for the reflection of multi-colored neon signs above.

Simon found himself staring at the top of one of the buildings up the street. It appeared to be taller than the rest and came to a point at the top, like a giant scepter. He was pretty sure it was the "tower" that Luciano had referred to. There he would meet with the vampire council, which consisted of five human vampires. He had been prepped with information about the vampires for the past month. He learned that there are two types of vampires: natural vampires and human vampires, called "artificial vampires" by some. Natural vampires were completely inhuman. They were savage creatures with little intelligence. Human vampires more closely resembled the vampire of legend. Being once human, they could easily pass as human if they needed as they still mostly resembled their former selves. Simon knew little more than that. Prior to taking his job he had known even less. Even still, the government knew very little about them anyway. As most scientific research, particularly biological research, had been outlawed with the formation of the Empire, the government would probably continue to know very little for quite some time.

Up ahead and to the left, the building that resembled a scepter towered up into the sky, as if it were a pillar holding up the heavens. Around the entrance were dozens of palm trees and a huge shattered neon sign along the wall of it that appeared to say "St_a_o_p_ere" with several unintelligible letters in between. Below the sign was a large, black video screen. Under the blank screen was a wide balcony lined neatly with tables and chairs for dining. Simon stood, staring up at the huge structure. The vampire, noticing that his follower had stopped, turned and looked at Simon.

"The council awaits your presence, Mr. Withers," Luciano said. Simon snapped out of the spell the huge building put on him and smiled at his guide as politely as he could.

"Sorry, I've never seen such a sight before. It's a little overwhelming," he said.

The vampire did not reply but only turned and led the way through the left of two mouth-like openings at the bottom of the building. Then he opened a glass door and gestured for Simon to enter. Luciano held the door as Simon walked in. There was a deep chill in the air inside. The vampire led him to an elevator and pushed the up button with his bleach-white finger. A moment later, Simon heard a ding and the elevator door opened. The two got in and Luciano ran his hand down the myriad of buttons until it came to the very last and tapped it quickly. When the vampire moved his hand away from the button, Simon noticed that it was the 106th floor. He made a mental note to find out why no one had ever asked him if he was afraid of heights. He grabbed ahold of the railing tightly as the elevator raced upward. As he stood quietly in the elevator he noticed that the vampire didn't seem to breathe. He looked up and watched as the digital numbers changed to display the current floor. He was surprised to see that even though they were going what felt like a ridiculous speed to him, they had only just passed the 22nd floor. He took a deep breath and tried to think about something else.

The vampire stood completely still before him and neither made a sound nor flinched. It were as if he were a statue. As the floor numbers slowly changed, Simon became nervous. He kept picturing his vampire escort turning around and lunging for his neck with those sharp fangs out. He knew he was being paranoid, but he couldn't help it. The elevator ride seemed to go on forever and it was his first accompanied by the undead. He looked at the back of his hands, following the visible veins up to his wrists. Then he popped his knuckles and his neck. When his neck would pop no more, he moved to something else. He lifted up onto his toes, held his heels up, and then set them back down over and over. Then he swung his arms from front to back. He almost started whistling when Luciano spoke.

"Your heart rate is rather high, Mr. Withers," the vampire said. Simon stopped moving immediately and swallowed.

"How... how do you know that?" he asked.

"I can hear it. It is louder to me than the cable pulling the elevator. You should relax or you will end up like Roger Wallen," he said.

Roger Wallen had been the third Mediator to the vampires. He had died of a heart attack on his seventh meeting with them. Simon swallowed again.

He practiced the focusing techniques the doctors had taught him in order to calm himself. Then he sneered at the vampire's back.

"I'm not a stupid coward like Roger Wallen. You filthy demons don't scare me. I fear only the Lord of heaven and earth. Roger Wallen wouldn't be dead if he had been faithful to the Lord. God punishes the weak and unfaithful," Simon said, his voice nearly cracking.

"If you say so, Mr. Withers," Luciano said, looking at Simon and smiling.

Simon couldn't help but falter a little from that grin. He let out a nervous cough and looked up at the red digital numbers. The numbers changed from 87 to 88. After a moment of staring at him, Luciano turned and faced the elevator door. Simon exhaled the breath he had been holding the entire time. Somehow, he wasn't sure how, he could just tell that Luciano's grin had widened.

After a while of focusing and eventually daydreaming about his trip home, Simon heard the "ding" that marked the arrival to their destination. The elevator doors opened, revealing a huge round open room with dinner tables everywhere. The walls were angled glass windows that looked out on the city. There were as many street lights, it seemed, as there had been stars in the sky on his way in the car. At the far end of the room was a door leading out to the balcony that seemed to go all around the building. It reminded Simon of the space needle in Seattle. He had never been there but he had seen many pictures. Luciano motioned to the door.

"The council is outside waiting," he said.

"Thanks," Simon replied. Then after a moment of hesitation he walked numbly toward the door. When he got to it, he could see several pale figures in various shades of clothing sitting at a table outside the door and to the left. He weakly pulled open the door and almost lost hold of it. One of the figures, in a movement he could barely discern, swished from the table over to hold the door for him. The gesture, probably only meant to be helpful, scared him worse than anything else had so far. A fit of laughter broke out from several of the vampires at the table; however, one of them did not look the least bit amused. The vampire holding the door was a much older-looking male, with neat, short, gray hair and prestigious features. He had brown eyes, unlike the

blood red eyes of Luciano. As Simon's heart slowed, he noticed a faint, familiar, sweet scent he couldn't quite place.

"I am sorry, Mr. Withers, I did not mean to scare you," he said.

The vampires that were laughing at the table only laughed harder. One of them attempted to speak in between fits of laughter.

"Sure, you didn't, Edgar, sure you didn't," a slender vampire with short, messy blond hair said.

"Please let me introduce all of us," the gray-headed vampire said. "My name is Edgar. This is Peter," he said pointing to the blonde. "Stanislov," he said aiming his hand at a short male with brown wooly hair on his head and face. "Rachel," he said moving on to a beautiful redhead with green eyes next to Stanislov. "And Ishan," he added pointing to the end of the table to what could have been Luciano's shorter twin. Ishan was the only one at the table who wasn't still laughing. All of them were wearing business attire as well. Ishan looked back at Simon with a look of contempt. Simon noticed that Ishan also had red eyes, yet the others did not.

"We are pleased to meet you, Mr. Withers. Can I call you Simon?" he asked in a cold tone. The other vampires abruptly went quiet at the sound of his voice.

"Indeed, sir, please do," Simon said shakily.

"Sit down then," he said. Simon pulled out the only empty chair and sat down. The sweetness he had smelled was overpowering now. It seemed to emanate from the vampires. When he looked down at the table in front of him, he was surprised to see a plate of crab legs and butter sauce beside a large wine glass before him. He couldn't smell the food over whatever aroma was coming from the vampires.

"Please enjoy yourself. It is not often that we get to entertain humans," Ishan said. Simon was reluctant, but the vampires, all but Ishan, sat watching expectantly. So, he began by cracking open one of the legs and pulling out its meat. As he dipped it in the sauce and took the first bite, he noticed the vampires watching everything he was doing with great interest. All except Ishan. A couple of crab legs later and he noticed the lust in their eyes as they

watched him. His stomach turned. After Simon had gulped down all the wine, Rachel picked up a bottle and winked at Simon and refilled his glass. At one point he stopped eating and looked around at their staring faces nervously.

"Shall we get started with business?" he asked. The vampires only gave him dark looks and Ishan only sighed.

"Please, finish first, Mr. Withers," Rachel said.

Without a word, Simon started eating again. He had the distinct feeling that the vampires would be very angry and offended if he did not finish every last bite. They continued to watch him passionately. He even thought he saw Peter lick his lips out of the corner of his eyes. But, fearfully, he kept his eyes on the food he was eating and didn't stop to speak again until he had devoured the last bit of crab meat.

"So, where should we start, gentlemen?" he asked, wiping his mouth with a napkin.

Rachel coughed loudly and made an annoyed grunt.

"I'm sorry, ladies and gentlemen," Simon corrected.

"What's the matter Simon?" Rachel asked "Are you eager to leave?" she continued.

"No. I'm just a get-down-to-business type of guy," Simon said and laughed timidly.

"Oh, you are, are you?" she asked. He felt a cold foot slide up the instep of his right leg. "I like a get down... to... business... type of guy," she said as Peter and Stanislov laughed heartily. The foot was still moving up his instep and was now passing his knee, coming up to the inner side of his thigh. He went tense, and realized that as the foot moved closer to his crotch, he became more excited and repulsed, simultaneously. His excitement immediately turned to anger.

"Get off of me, whore of Babylon!" he yelled at her in disgust. She stood up and hissed at him, neon light reflecting off of her exposed fangs. Peter and Stanislov were smiling with anticipation. Edgar looked concerned and Ishan appeared to be indifferent to the whole situation.

"I would suggest you refrain from insulting us," Ishan said in a bored voice.

"Yes, I would suggest that, too," Rachel whispered, glaring at Simon.

"I'm sorry. But I won't put up with this sort of filthy sin being pushed upon me," Simon said.

Ishan went to speak, but before he could, in a flash, Peter was on top of the table with his cold hand wrapped around Simon's throat, picking him up out of his seat by it. Simon was choking. He gasped for air as everything around him seemed to fade. He heard laughter from Rachel and probably Stanislov. Ishan seemed to be complaining in the same weary voice. Simon tried to pray inside his head but couldn't make the words in his brain with his oxygen being cut off more and more. He was aware he was now being lifted high above the table. Everything went blurry and he felt all the blood rush to his head. His vision cleared some. He could see in front of him a pair of upside down feet standing on concrete behind a rail. He followed the legs down to see that they belonged to Peter. Then he followed Peter's outstretched arm to see that it was holding him by the ankle.

He tried to reach for his own ankle to free it. That was when he felt the breeze. It seemed just a little too strong. He looked up to what he thought would be the floor of the balcony. His heart almost burst as he saw the lights of the city seemingly above him, but he knew it was actually below him. He could feel his crab leg dinner moving up his esophagus as he looked down at the great city below. He screamed loudly only to hear several of the vampires reply with more laughter. He could barely make out what Ishan was saying over the laughter.

"Must everything be a joke?" Ishan asked.

Peter was saying something back, but Simon didn't hear it as he had begun vomiting. He watched as the vomit fell to the street below over a matter of several minutes. He wiped his mouth with his sleeve. When he looked up at Peter again, the vampire snarled at him, his blue eyes reflecting Simon's horrified expression.

"Maybe now you'll treat the lady with respect," Peter said.

Simon felt his stomach turn again and felt a cold spot on his lap as another breeze touched him. Great, he had pissed himself. How lovely. As if all this hadn't been enough, Peter swiveled his wrist from side to side, swinging Simon like a pendulum. Simon closed his eyes. Peter swung him faster. Simon vomited again. Some of it went up his nose and he started to choke on it. He was sure Peter would let go at any moment. He could hear Rachel screaming something at him in a horrible, gleeful tone, but he couldn't make out the words. Stanislov continued to laugh harder and harder. Peter, still laughing, taunted Simon.

"You're gonna die, Simon. Is your god gonna save you? I don't think He will, you know why?" Peter asked with bitterness in his voice. "Because your god doesn't care about you. He thinks you're scum," Peter said, still swinging Simon all the while. Simon finally coughed up the vomit he had been choking on. The volume of the vampires seemed to be rising to a fevered pitch, when out of nowhere they were silenced by a single word from Ishan.

"Enough," he said, with only a hint of emotion.

Simon felt himself rise again. He closed his eyes even tighter. Then he felt himself turning around. Before he knew it, he was no longer moving yet still felt as though he were. He opened his eyes slowly and confirmed he was sitting back in his seat. When his view came into focus, he noticed Rachel sitting right in front of him with a neat, satisfied smile on her lips. Looking around at the rest of the table, he saw that all of the vampires, except Ishan, shared her expression. Ishan looked down at his own fingernails.

"Mr. Withers, we want the Big Easy," Ishan said with what sounded like conviction relative to his prior speaking tones.

"The big what?"

"New Orleans, Simon. The Big Easy," Ishan explained.

"Now you want to talk business?" Simon asked, his voice near to screaming. "At least give me a few minutes to recover first."

"By all means. Calm yourself. Here, have some more wine," Ishan said, refilling Simon's glass.

Simon took a deep breath, picked up the wine glass, and tipped it back, gulping the contents until he emptied the glass. Then he exhaled loudly and sat back in his seat, wiping the mess from his face and hair with some napkins he had taken from the table. His heart was still beating pretty fast, but it was gently slowing down. He looked back at Ishan.

"That's not negotiable," he said, "and from what I understand you have been told this several times before." Ishan looked at him with his dark red eyes, showing the first emotion Simon had seen from his smooth face yet. It was anger. Simon swallowed hard as Ishan opened his mouth to speak.

CHAPTER 3

VIVA NECROPOLIS

Hank made sure to stuff the compass, a pair of camo pants, and a white T-shirt in the backpack before making his way for the door. He stepped around the shattered glass strewn on the floor. Making sure he was alone, he waited outside the door for any trace of sound other than the wind. Then he faced the direction he had already confirmed with the compass to be south and began to walk. As he wandered his way down the back alley behind the store, lighting his way with the flashlight, he thought about the city. It surprised him that the Empire hadn't come in and milked the place for all of its valuables. It was all completely useless to the vampires. Remembering what he learned as a child about the city before it and its original inhabitants were given to the vampires, Hank imagined what kind of treasures might still lay untouched. He was sure a greedy man would already be dead in his position. Behind the other buildings along the alley, Hank saw nothing that surprised him. Most had small dumpsters and miscellaneous trash lying about. A small motorbike lay behind one of the buildings, missing its front wheel. Underneath it, several cockroaches scurried.

He hadn't heard a scream in some time. But he learned years ago never to rely on his own sense of time. It had failed him too often before. The farther he went, the trashier everything seemed to be. At the end of the block and to his left, he could see what had probably once been a scary neighborhood to live in. The beam of his flashlight reflected off a bent, graffitied stop sign as he looked the block over. Given the low light of the

neighborhood, he figured it couldn't hurt to try that way. He was still pissed the army surplus store didn't have any maps of the city. He was afraid to go anywhere well lit, like a gas station, that might have one. So, he figured his best bet would be to keep the lights of the city behind him, keep going in one direction, and hope that eventually he would be safe. Not even knowing if he would find anything to point out the city limits, however, didn't give him much confidence. As he walked down the dark street, it surprised him to find some of the houses still had lights on after all these years. Then he remembered he wasn't the first person to run loose through the city since the war. The thought that others might have made it this far and hadn't survived gave him chills, but he tried his best to shrug them off.

Shining the flashlight at some of the houses, he walked along the dimly lit road. There was very little to see. Just old houses with heat-worn paint. The yards, or rather what was left of them, consisted of dusty ground with the occasional patch of short red and brown weeds. He continued on to the next block and then the next without incident. The only sounds were the echo of his footsteps. Eventually he started to calm down for the first time since he had been caught. For the first time in a week, he found himself able to let his thoughts wander. He found it ironic he had been condemned to die in a state once famous for legalized prostitution, considering the crime he was guilty of. He was more angry that the "prostitute" ended up being a morality cop than ashamed for what he had done. He looked up at the night sky and noticed that as he walked farther from the center of the city, more and more dim stars became visible. He was glad it didn't seem as though it would rain. But then again, this being his first visit to Nevada, he had no idea how often it rained here or how badly it could.

After walking about ten blocks or so, Hank found a knee-high concrete barrier at the end of a yard and sat down. He slipped the backpack off and reached inside, feeling around until he found the two thermoses. The first one he grabbed was red. He stuffed it back inside and grabbed the other in its place. He pulled the thermos out, unscrewed the lid, double checked it was water, and took a big drink. The water was warm but refreshing none the less. He was beginning to feel the hours since he ate his "last meal." He would hardly call it a meal, though. Miniature portions of toast, mashed potatoes, something that was supposed to be some kind of meat with gravy, and corn, all of which tasted like water. Bad water at that. He was beginning to wonder

what kind of canned foods he could find in the houses. He knew better than to look for frozen foods. It had been just over 20 years since anyone lived here. He turned and looked at the house behind him. After a moment of thinking it through, he decided to give it a shot.

He stood up and pulled his machete from its sheath. He could barely make out the dried blood on the blade in the pale street light coming from down the block. The wind picked up, sending a tumbleweed in front of Hank as he started walking through the yard toward the house. Ahead, he could see a large porch above three large concrete steps. The house was made of brick. He couldn't tell if the brick was brown or some odd shade of red. The front door had once been painted dark brown but now only flakes of the original paint remained. It had a small square window towards the top. As he shined his flashlight around the porch, several spider webs reflected the light back at him in thin lines of bright silver weaved into intricate patterns. He was about to turn around and give up when his stomach growled. He began weighing his options. On one hand, he could deal with some spiders even if he did have a pretty strong case of arachnophobia. On the other hand, it was common knowledge that the suburbs, cities, and towns that once surrounded the city eventually became abandoned after the blood pact. Who knew when he would find food? Beyond that, if he made it out of the city alive, he would still be a fugitive and had little hope of being safe anywhere populated.

He shined the flashlight around again looking for any visible spiders in the hope that maybe they were long gone. His hope disintegrated when he saw a huge brown spider sitting in the middle of one of the webs. It hung upside down a few feet to the left of the door above an old wooden rocking chair sitting against the wall. He pointed the flashlight at it and ran it along the web to the right until he could see that the web ended on the other side of the door.

"Shit," he said, cringing. He took a deep breath and before he could talk himself out of it, he charged up the stairs. He put the machete in its sheath and went for the door. He reached out and tried to turn the doorknob. It turned freely but the door would not open. He took the flashlight into his right hand and busted in the little window with the handle end. The sound of the window breaking echoed off the houses across the streets, causing him to

jump and look behind himself. When he managed to calm himself again, he turned back to the door. This was turning out to be a lot of hassle.

Hank put the flashlight under his left arm and picked up the rocking chair. It felt light as he put it in front of the door. Then he stepped up onto it and reached his right arm inside the little window. Once his whole arm was inside he felt around for locks. Finding what felt like a small, oval knob, he tried turning it. As his fingers pressed into the knob, he had to push himself against the door in order to reach enough to turn it. Then it made a loud click and a large cloud of dust shot out from between the door and the door jam. While pulling his arm out of the window, Hank fanned the dust cloud with his other hand and coughed to free his lungs of the dust. Once he could breathe again, he reached down and tried the doorknob once more. With the deadbolt unlocked, it slid open immediately. Hank laughed in triumph, jumped down from the chair, and pulled it aside. Then, with a huge grin on his face and his flashlight at the ready, he pushed the door wide open. A thick, musty smell nearly knocked him over. Inside, everywhere he shined the flashlight, was a thick cover of spider webs. In just one pass of the flashlight, he counted nine spiders within the mess of webs.

"Son of a bitch," he said bitterly, looking wide-eyed at the silver threaded mess before him.

* * *

Ishan sat with his mouth open about to speak when he seemed to change his mind. He closed his mouth, took a deep breath, and smiled at Simon.

"Do you know the history of this magnificent building on which we all sit, Simon?" he asked, spreading his arms out and turning his head to look from one end of the building to the other. Simon shook his head nervously.

"No, sir, I do not," he stammered.

"It's called," Ishan said, pausing with an air of mystique, "the Stratosphere. I wouldn't expect you to know anything about it. In fact, I would be quite surprised if you knew much of anything about this city's history at all." The rest of the vampires sat as still as if they were dead watching Ishan like he had hypnotized them.

Simon only nodded. Indeed, he knew very little about the city's history nor did he care to know. He knew it had once been a human slush pit of sin. That was all that mattered. The righteous Empire, of whom Simon had known and loved most of his life, had done God's will using these demons he was sitting with right now to "cleanse" the city.

"You see Simon, this building we sit atop was a source of entertainment. Not only for its breathtaking view, but for its restaurant inside, and ..." Ishan said, trailing off as he got up from his seat. Simon noticed the vampire was holding some kind of handheld electric device. Ishan pushed a button on the device and held out his arms while something huge with neon lights began to come out of the building behind him. Then the thing came to a stop and tipped downward like a huge teeter totter. When it was still, Simon noticed it was actually some sort of amusement ride. "...for its thrilling rides." Ishan said.

Simon began to sweat profusely as the rest of the vampires at the table leapt from their seats and joined Ishan in admiring the ride.

"This," Ishan said, pointing up at the ride he was still facing "is the X-Scream." The other vampires applauded.

Simon felt his stomach turn again. He was beginning to think he liked Ishan much better when the vampire seemed bored and indifferent. But now, Simon had managed to unhinge him. Realizing this, Simon began to shake uncontrollably while still gripping the arms of his chair. At the very moment Simon began to shake, Ishan turned to face him. Looking directly into Simon's eyes he spoke in the same bored tone he had used earlier.

"Peter, give Mr. Withers the time of his life."

Peter grinned with delight.

"Unless," Ishan said, "Mr. Withers, you can do something to help us?"

"It's not up to me. I'm just a little pissant!" he yelled, stumbling to his feet. "Please, I don't have the power to make such arrangements!"

Ishan's stare darkened. "Then why are you the Mediator?" he asked and then clenched his trembling jaw. As if they had been cued, Peter and the other vampires began moving toward Simon in a slow stalking prow. Their bodies appeared to be shivering. Simon was starting to wonder if it was really blood these particular vampires lusted after and not pure fear. He looked at them as they crept up to him. He knew it was pointless but his body decided it was time to go. He turned and ran with all of his might, faster than he had probably ever run his whole life. Within fifteen feet, several blurs flashed in front of him. Before his brain could process that each blur had been a vampire, he was looking up at the sky and then down at his legs dragging on the concrete floor. He could only manage to keep his head turned far enough for a split second, but he recognized that Peter was the one dragging him. He could see the others at Peter's side out of the corner of his eyes as he slid along behind them. Scared and exhausted, he didn't have the strength or determination to fight.

Simon felt himself rise into the air and watched the stars grow long glowing tails as Peter flung him down into the front seat of the X-Scream. As he sat there helpless, being strapped into an amusement ride at the top of a skyscraping tower by a vampire, Simon caught a glimpse of Ishan back at the table. The head vampire sat there like a statue leaning to his right. Even though he was seeing Ishan from behind, Simon could tell from the way his arm held up his head that he was in deep thought. He could hear several plops as the other vampires sat down in the seats behind him. Peter, however, positioned himself in front of Simon, facing him, by wedging himself between Simon's seat and the nose of the ride.

The last thought Simon had as the ride began creeping forward was that vampires were truly absurd. A moment later the ride shot forward and down as Simon felt his body thrown back against the chair. He was sure this was what it felt like to crash a plane from the pilot's point of view. The motion only lasted a few seconds, but felt like eternity, as the vampires shouted out with excitement. Then the ride came to its furthest forward point and stopped, causing the seat belt holding Simon to jerk at his body. Simon

screamed out in pain. Peter held onto Simon's seat and smiled down at him with his fangs visible, hardly showing any effects from the jolt.

"Don't you understand, Simon?" Peter yelled over the cheering of the other vampires. "We don't want to negotiate with a peon like you!" Peter's expression became serious for the first time. "We want to get things done and we can't do that with someone we can't respect!" The ride began to rise until Simon could feel his equilibrium come back and then it jerked again. Then smooth, cold hands slid down and back up Simon's chest. A female voice he knew to be Rachel's whispered into his ear.

"You see, Simon, you Mediators are all alike," she said in a hiss. "So proud and righteous. So slick and slithery," she continued, her pitch and volume rising. "So weak and useless!" she screamed full on into his ear.

Silence filled Simon's left side as he felt blood run down the side of his face from his ear. Before he could even make the connection Rachel began to lick the blood from his face like a cat lapping up milk. As she licked up closer to his ear, her fangs lightly grazed his earlobe, exciting him in more than one way at the same time. She seemed to sense his arousal and immediately acted upon it. She began sliding her hand down his chest slowly. Then his stomach. She groped at the bulge in his crotch. He closed his eyes in a mixture of revulsion and pleasure.

As she did this, she began sliding her fangs from his ear along his cheek sideways. This increased his excitement for reasons he could not begin to understand. He could tell he was starting to get close. She lifted her head from his and smiled at him as if she could tell as well. He was so mesmerized with ecstasy that he forgot all about his inhibitions, his religious zeal, and his righteous Empire. He even pretended he didn't enjoy Peter standing there watching.

When he was on the very verge of climax, she pulled her hand away and in a blur of movement she punched him in the shoulder. It snapped loudly as Simon felt every nerve in his body relocate. Half went to his crotch and the other half into his collar bone, where they burst into agony. He screamed in a high pitch his vocal chords had never hit before. Peter burst out laughing. Then, at that very moment, the ride began to lean backward slowly. Within a few seconds, it was shooting backward. Simon's body pushed against the

harness, causing him more pain than his body could withstand. Everything began to fade including the pain. Then Simon went into a warm, dark abyss.

When he woke up, Simon was sitting in the chair he was first offered upon arriving. The pain in his shoulder was gone and he could hear someone talking to him from both of his ears. He opened his eyes and saw the vampires all sitting where they had been earlier.

"My, sh-shoulder. It's not broken... and my ear. I can hear. Wha-what did you do?" he asked frantically. The vampires all looked at him with curious expressions.

"I'm afraid, I don't know what you're talking about, Simon," Ishan said. "Peter, Rachel, do you know what Mr. Withers is speaking of?"

"No, I haven't the slightest clue," Peter said and smirked.

"Neither have I," Rachel added, smiling.

Then, all of their faces became serious.

"Why would we do such things to our dear, sweet Mediator?" Ishan asked in his dull drone.

"Besides, the blood pact forbids it," Peter said, and all of the vampires except Ishan convulsed with laughter. Ishan, however, did manage a slight grin.

"Our business is through, Mediator," Ishan said with a strong overtone of rage.

"Oh, thank God." Simon whispered, putting his hands up to his face as if to pray. "But wait," he said, dropping his hands to his side. "We haven't even negotiated anything. Nothing has been accomplished."

"As always," Ishan said. He looked at Simon, blankly. For a split second, Simon saw Ishan's face change into a scowl and then back to normal. It happened so fast, Simon wasn't even sure what he had just seen was real. He picked that moment to get up. None of the vampires moved to stop him. With a flash of movement and a gust of wind, Luciano was at Ishan's side, leaning over and whispering into his ear. Simon pushed his chair in, turned,

and began to walk toward the door. He heard nothing at all until he was about six feet from the door.

"It appears there is still one more convict loose within the city. Peter, please escort Mr. Withers back to his car," Ishan said. Simon felt his knees go weak. In an instant, Peter moved in front of him, holding the door open for him. Something about the look on Peter's face brought Simon back to himself. He flooded with anger. He was no longer relieved that his shoulder and his ear were fine. He wanted to prove these demons had hurt him. Maybe then the Empire, his beloved Empire, would stamp out this abomination once and for all.

"After you, Simon," Peter said, still holding the door. Then he winked, making sure to show his fangs as well. Simon stomped through the open door and headed across the large round room for the elevator he'd come up in. Before Simon was halfway there, Peter stood next to the elevator with his hands behind his back, the elevator down button already lit up. When Simon arrived within a few strides of the elevator door, he heard it "ding" and then open just in time for him to step in. Once inside and facing the elevator door, Peter accompanied him and hit the ground button. So far, it seemed Peter was behaving himself.

But then, the elevator door closed and he seemed to disappear. Simon jumped. He turned to check behind himself. There was nothing there. He turned again to make sure Peter was not moving with him. Then, he backed toward the rear of the elevator. When he was against the back of the elevator, he noticed movement and heard a whistle above him. He looked up to find Peter hanging from the ceiling of the elevator, crouched as if to strike. His feet were burrowed into the gray ceiling tiles. His fangs dripped saliva as he smiled down at Simon. Peter's irises seemed to be colorless now.

"I'm not going to hurt you, Simon," Peter said, widening his grin as he spoke. Then, his expression changed to false fear and he said "I wouldn't dare break the blood pact," while moving his index finger back and forth as if correcting a naughty child. Then, his body seemed to twist into a blur of motion and the light went out. A second later, Simon heard a hissing to his immediate right, so he ran toward the left side of the elevator. The hissing moved in front of him, so he stumbled back to where he had been. An instant later, he felt a slight touch against his cheek and this spooked him even more,

causing him to jump toward the front of the elevator. He looked up, trying to find the digital display, but it seemed to be out as well. Then, he felt just enough of a gentle push to the back of his knees to send him falling backwards.

He cringed, waiting for the impending collision with the floor. Instead, he landed on what felt like two cold fleshy poles. The door opened and light enveloped the elevator as the two fleshy poles revealed themselves to be Peter's arms. Peter lifted Simon without effort and threw him out of the elevator. Simon landed right on his feet, sharp pain shooting up his ankles. Before he could turn and complain, Peter was in front of him holding the glass door open. Simon gritted his teeth fiercely and marched toward the door. He could see a look of suspense in Peter's stature as the vampire stood holding the door. When Simon walked through, he felt a gust of air and looked back to where Peter had been to see the door slowly sway backward and close with no sign of Peter. When he turned back to look forward, Peter's face was a mere centimeter from his own.

"Boo!" Peter said and laughed. Then he moved a few feet away from Simon in a swift movement. "I promise, I promise, I'll stop. I've had my fun," he said with a grin.

This neither comforted nor calmed Simon. He began walking briskly down the sidewalk he knew led back to the welcome sign and the Empire-assigned car. After a moment, he noticed Peter walking alongside him, watching him with a smile. They walked on, stepping over miscellaneous pieces of brick and metal here and there. He could see the car. It looked like a toy off in the distance. As he angled his walking to adjust for the curve in the road, he felt a vibration from within his pocket. He reached in and pulled out his cell phone. The small digital display said *Ted Chambers*. He pecked angrily at the green answer button on the phone and slammed it to his ear.

"Simon, how is it going?" Ted asked, trying to sound cheerful.

"How is it going?" Simon repeated. "I'll tell you how it's going! These monsters are... are.. are.. horrible!" he yelled into the phone. "They have insulted me, corrupted me, terrorized me, and without even allowing me the ability to actually do the job I was sent here to do!"

"Simon, are you still in the city?" Ted asked in an urgent tone.

"Yes I'm still in the city, I'm almost back to the car!" he said, continuing to vent his trauma. "These vile creatures have done things to me I—"

Ted interrupted him. "Be careful, Simon, don't do anything rash. There could be serious cons—"

"I'll be careful, all right!" Simon shouted. "I'll be careful. In fact I won't need to be careful anymore..."

"Simon, wait!"

"...because I quit!" Simon barked, slamming the cell phone against his leg. He heard his own voice echoing the words "I quit" off of the surrounding buildings. Then he felt a breeze and looked around to notice Peter was standing completely still with a look on his face Simon had not yet seen him make. Peter no longer looked at him playfully. He had a look of curious interest. Like a cat when it looks at a mouse.

"So, Mr. Withers, you are no longer Mediator to Necropolis?" Peter asked, showing way more enthusiasm than Simon could understand.

"Yes, I quit! I will not suffer such outrageous blasphemy and torture!" He yelled full on in Peter's face. The reaction from Peter was not what Simon expected. Peter stood silently, a grin stretching across his face. Then, he broke out in an uproar of laughter to the point of tears streaming down his face. Simon didn't understand and became even angrier, grinding his teeth together in fury. This only seemed to renew Peter's ongoing fit of howling. Then, after a few more minutes of guffawing, Peter leaned forward trying to catch his breath.

"Oh, that is just great," he said in a high-pitched voice still tingling with humor. "So, you are no longer Mediator protected lawfully by the Empire, Simon?" he asked and gave another chuckle.

"Yes, that's exactly what I - wait, no, what do you mean? I'm still protected, why wouldn't I be protected?" he cried desperately. Then came the distant sound of an engine starting. He turned to see the Empire-assigned car turning around and then driving away. Then, he swallowed and turned to look

at Peter. Peter was no longer laughing. He straightened up and arched forward, his irises darkening to black, and his chin pulling backwards as his mouth opened to make way for his fangs.

"Only the Mediator is protected. If you are no longer Mediator and within our city then by our blood pact with the Emperor, you are now ours for the taking and no one will hear your screams," Peter said in a deep, growling voice. The next second Simon screamed as he felt his back slam against a wall and Peter's fangs tear into his throat. Then, slowly, the world fluttered dizzily away.

* * *

But Peter had lied. He knew that it was possible, somewhere out there in the city, someone could hear Simon's screams. In fact, he was counting on it. Because, once he was finished draining every last drop of fiery, self-righteous blood from Simon Withers, Peter had a job to do. There was still one convict loose in the city and Ishan expected Peter to take care of this. Within his mild statement was a charge. "Finish this loose marauder before the dawn or be prepared to lose your place on the council."

It had already been hanging in the balance, his place on the council. He had angered Ishan far too much in recent times. Peter tightened in ecstasy as he imagined the blood he was consuming from Simon's throat was actually Ishan's. What he wouldn't give to take Ishan's place and drink his blood. To quicken himself with the old vampire's heart while it was still beating. But he knew he needed more time. He would first have to find this convict and prove he still deserved his place among the others. Then, when he was back in their good graces, when Ishan least expected it, he would strike. With this thought, he stood up triumphantly, holding Simon's limp body close. Then with a flick of his head, he threw the thing that was once Simon down onto the sidewalk where it landed, crumpled against the brick wall of the building. Then, he hunched down and opened up his senses. It wasn't hard with fresh blood in him. Always the blood would heighten his senses to the point of becoming almost maddeningly sensitive. He heard a rat scurry exactly 1.7

kilometers away. He knew it headed south at slightly less than a fourth of a mile an hour. He turned toward the west focusing all his senses and immediately heard the quick beating of a human heart. Then before he could hold back his amplified hearing the sound of the human's voice tore through his ears.

"Son of a bitch," the voice said. Peter burst into a run toward the sound at what he estimated to be 174 kilometers per hour, faster than Peter had ever ran before.

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